

My legs felt like stones.

The fact that this was the first time Mr. Vergilius and I were separated since we came to the Ring's gallery had been weighing on me.

To be honest, it isn't just the gallery. Most of the time, he's been with me to help me with work lately. And when he wasn't around, other experienced Fixers have kept me company.

Being in those groups limited my role, but I was able to go unharmed thanks to them.

Then, perhaps...

These heavy footsteps I'm taking right now might be my first leap toward being an independent Fixer.

"Haah..."

I couldn't help but sigh. The corridor was narrow, but unfathomably long.

What will I do if I go the wrong way?

What if the door handle was booby-trapped? Even if it isn't, what if the door doesn't lead to where I want? No, what if I ran into an unexpected foe and got trounced before I could even reach my destination?

"Take my gladius."

That's what he told me.

I can only assume the reason he gave me his gladius was because he couldn't put his full trust in my capabilities.

Still... Trusting me with his weapon may have been his way of showing that he does have a bit of faith in me.

"If that's the case..."

And if I want to repay his partial trust, I have to do this right.

C'mon, pull yourself together, Garnet.

Collecting my thoughts, I closed my eyes.

Doors of an identical shape, their numbers out of order. There's one correct door that must be among them.

In my head, I slowly retraced Lan Yen's intel and the footage Lapis risked her life to film.

My memory does not fail me; I clearly remember the starting point and the goal from the video.

"Room 718."

The destination wasn't too far from where I was.

"Eye, fragment... and glass."

Although I was never taught how to use mental keyword locks, the door opened by just thinking the words. It was so simple and effortless, it made all my concerns moot.

Gripping back tension before I could loosen up, I gently entered the open door.

To the laboratory... that I saw in the video.

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With each step I take, my neurons fire off furiously.

Every little thing that comes into my sight brings up a past lesson. For example, the corner up ahead.

In the Seven Association's seminar, they advised us to hold our breath for a moment and keep our ears open for possible footsteps whenever we approach the corner of a path. There might be a trap just out of view, or an ambush waiting to strike unsuspecting victims.

“.....”

The sound of my swallowed saliva rings loudly in my ears.

“It only seems loud because I’m nervous,” I consoled to myself, as I quietly leaned on the wall and pictured what was around the corner.

Faint and low-pitched sounds, the time between footsteps, and the occasional chatter.

Two people are around the corner. Fortunately, they didn’t seem to have noticed me.

Unfortunately, though, this corridor is way too clean. I didn’t see any objects or props I could use as cover on the way here, and it’d be reasonable to guess that there won’t be any ahead either.

Conflict is probably... unavoidable.

“You gotta be aware of your limits and know what moves you can and can’t make in battle.”

While tightening my grip on his gladius, I was reminded of Rikako’s words.

She would often make insightful remarks. It kind of bothers me that her stare falls on me whenever she says such things, but I’m sure she meant well with the advice.

And it was thanks to her that I could shake off thoughts beyond my level right now.

In all likelihood, trying to mimic the surprise attacks Mr. Vergilius often performs won't work out.

In that case, a better plan would be to drop my foe's guard by making myself look sloppy, and then lunging at them. I should be able to close the distance while they're confused. They'll soon brace themselves and attack me, but when they do, they will probably go for the part they see first—my left arm.

That's when I'll thrust the sword into a vital point with my right arm.

"I suppose losing my left arm is... a price I can deal with."

Deciding to give up my nondominant left arm instead of my right was a result of weighing my options. I heard prosthetic replacements for frequently used body parts cost more. Something about it being trickier to replicate the muscle mass and nerve compatibility...

I felt pathetic for having thoughts like these.

Why am I making plans with the premise that I'm going to lose an arm before I've even begun fighting? Shouldn't I be thinking of ways to get through this without losing any limbs?

These aren't the kinds of thoughts he would have.

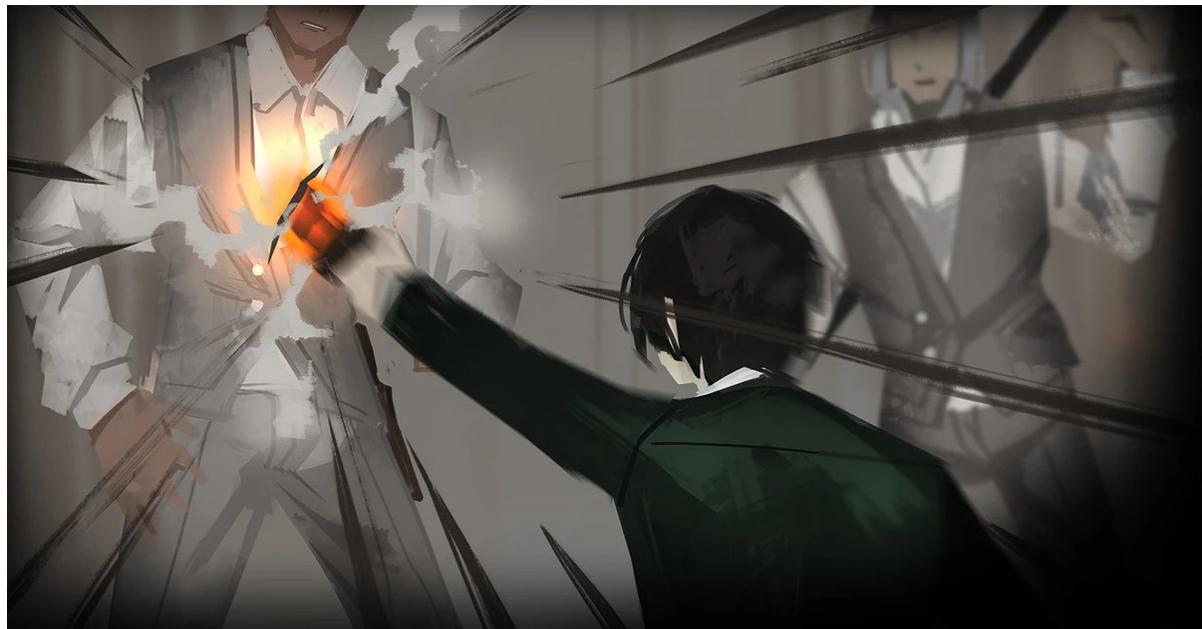
If only I wasn't such a milksop...

“Huff.”

The footsteps grew close enough to drown out my stray thoughts.

There's no time left to strategize. I'm a pushover, so I should do what a pushover can to win.

“W-What—?!”



I don't remember how I made the leap.

The target's frightened breath, their shoes squeaking against the floor in response to this sudden assault, the fluttering of white gowns, and the terrified faces of two researchers entered my senses as disconnected snapshots.

Despite being members of the Ring, my opponents didn't appear to be good fighters. However, they seemed to have some means of self-defense, judging from the way they reached into their coats.

I gave them an exploitable opening, moving my left arm their way.

Please, not a critical spot.

“Nuaah!!!”

Bracing for serious pain in my arm, I stabbed the gladius into one researcher's heart with all my might.

“Kuhg!”

“Hmmh...?”

I could feel the gladius push its tip through their muscles, but the pain crossing my left arm never came.

Were they too struck with panic to attack?

When I glanced at my left arm, I saw that my coat had stopped the blade in its tracks.

“That explains why he gave me the coat as well...”

Before I could let gratitude and relief set in, the researcher at their side now charged me with their weapon drawn.

“Y-Yaargh! Stay away!”

I swung my gladius in an attempt to hit the blade of the dagger they pulled out. Then, I felt a strange click from the hilt.

“Huh...?”

Clank!

Instead of blades striking against each other, only the sound of one separated from its base, falling to the ground, had reached my ears. It fell off the dagger, like melted ice cream.

The heating mechanism...!

I remembered the guide's wound being cauterized by Mr. Vergilius's sword.

And now, that same burn was left on the upper half of this researcher's body, split in two and dropped on the floor.

Astonished by the sharpness of his gladius that can cut through a person's body smoothly and the durability of the coat I'm wearing, I felt a small pang of guilt for the two bodies on the floor. However, that soon subsided once I reminded myself of where they worked.

Looking for the kids I saw being tortured in laboratory machines, I ran across the corridor.

“Lapis...!”

This place was far more repugnant than in the footage.

Thinking of my friends who must be resting in discomfort inside those rows of test tubes made my stomach turn.

“...is how you can increase the refraction rate.”

“Noted. But if the refraction rate is too high...”

Following the sound of familiar voices, I found Rikako and Nanseul wearing M Corp attire. Some researchers seemed to be giving them explanations of the experiment they were doing.

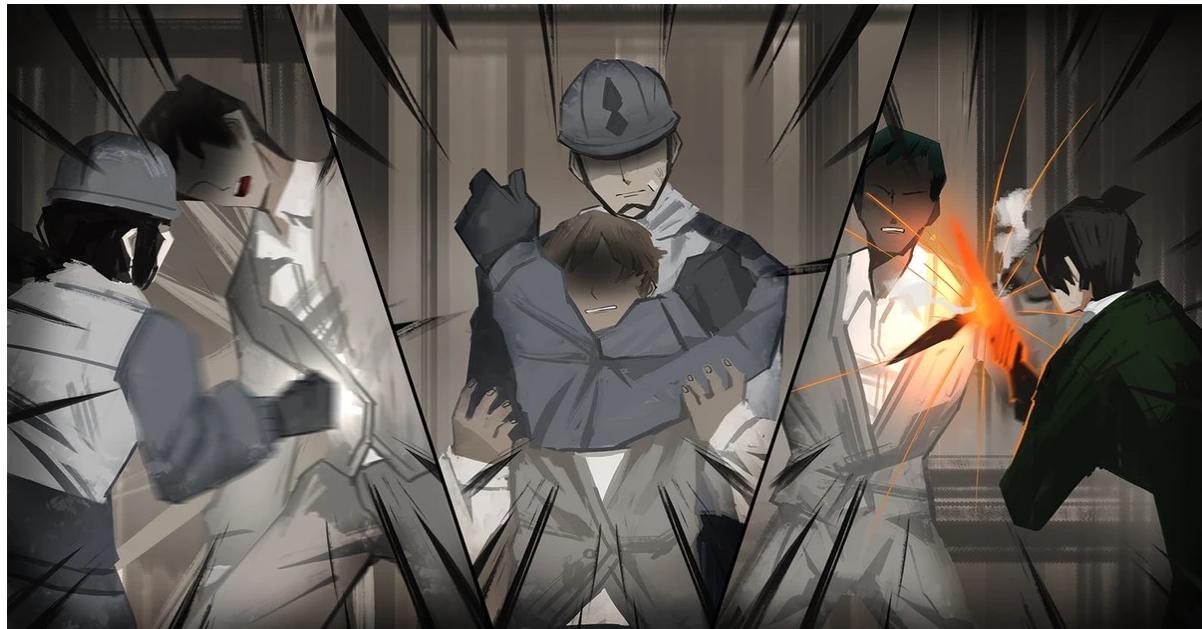
“I see, so this lever...”

I could sense relief in the eyes of our two fake M Corp. employees when we exchanged glances. Rikako chuckled and nudged her chin, while Nanseul gave me a discreet thumbs-up.

“Yeah, I think I’ve heard just about all I need.”

“Pardon? But I haven’t even started on the glass-window superposition or the linkage...”

“Nah, forget it. You must be tired from all the lab work, so why don’t you take a sweet nap. Nanseul, Garnet!”



Rikako's fist hits the flabbergasted researcher in the stomach. Meanwhile, Nanseul snuck up on the researcher next to him and choked them from behind. In the time it took him to deprive the researcher of consciousness, Rikako had already taken down three.

There were seven researchers in the lab. Rikako and Nanseul knocked out three each in less than five minutes.

I was able to subdue the last one with ease. It boosted my confidence to get a feel for what his sword and coat were capable of. Though, of course, I still had a long way to go to get on the level of these skilled Fixers.

"Garnet! Did you get here from the corridor by yourself? You've gotten pretty good."

Nanseul showered me with praise and raised thumbs.

"That wasn't anything impressive... All he did with our boss's sword and coat was beat a few pansies who couldn't wield a knife to save their lives."

"Ma'am, I saw you cheer for him while he fought, yelling 'Yeah, go get 'em!' and such."

“...I did, but only because it was so insufferable to watch. What, you have a problem?”

Rikako made a gruff reply.

Their quarreling that used to have me concerned about the state of the team felt like a breath of fresh air here. Perhaps it's these moments of relieving tension that helped them complete so many field jobs.

“Mister Vergilius will be back soon. How are things going on your side?”

“We were able to figure out the controls and how the machines work without much trouble. Wasted a bit of time thanks to Nanseul being a total bungler with machines... But hey, this wasn't a half-bad record.”

“C-Come now, I only struggled one time...”

“Ha! Back when I was your grade, it only took me a glimpse to get stuff all figured out. Fixers these days are raised too soft.”

Rikako's words make my heart beat with anticipation.

The two of them were assigned the roles of gaining entry into the lab while disguised as moonlight stone couriers since they earned higher Fixer grades—not through

stunning combat expertise—but through a plethora of certificates for various professions. We needed skilled personnel to deal with all these buttons and levers, as careless handling could cause terrible accidents like what was filmed in the footage.

I remember hearing from Denver that the reason Rikako keeps Nanseul around even though she scolds him like this daily is that he had skills worth developing.

“She wouldn’t have talked to him in the first place if he was an actual lost cause.”

That’s what Denver had added as she giggled.

In any case, having two capable Fixers with me lessened my worries.

“Then we can start rescuing my friends now! Where should we start?”

I asked in an admittedly hopeful tone. I wanted to rescue the kids as soon as possible and find Lapis.

“Oh...”

The two didn’t look too delighted, however.

Rikako made a perplexed face, and Nanseul slunk his eyes away.

I was familiar with this air. It was after watching Lapis's videotape at the Office—my plea to hurry and rescue her was met with a similar coldness.

“Garnet, our primary objective is to seize the Singularity, don’t you remember? It’s the reason we got into this job.”

Rikako said in a slightly frustrated but appeasing tone.

And I knew that. Fixers are motivated by the scents of interest. I was well aware that I should grow accustomed to this and adopt their mindset sooner rather than later.

But still...

“I know. But if you know the controls, it shouldn’t be an issue to stop the machines right now.”

I’m not demanding that we push everything else aside to save my friends by force. If they know how to operate the machines, surely there’s nothing stopping them from getting the subjects out. I tried to persuade Rikako with that logic.

“About that... Things got a bit more complicated, Garnet...”

That's when Nanseul reluctantly brought up something.

"We thought we could just turn the machines off and set your friends free... But we learned on closer inspection that the data will reset once the machines shut down. Which means..."

"In short, losing the data means we lose our chance at seizing the Singularity. So the kids will have to wait."

Rikako always based her priorities on value. And when two objectives were in conflict, she would discard the one with less worth without batting an eye. Perhaps remaining level-headed throughout the process is what allowed her to climb to where she stands now.

I can't help but wonder how I look in her eyes.

An immature rookie who whines when things aren't going his way. An incompetent fledgeling unfit to work as a Fixer. Or worse, she might not be thinking of me as a colleague at all. Her priorities might have shifted a little, had the subjects lying in the tubes been acquaintances of her coworker.

"But... What if something happens while downloading the data?"

And here I was, miserably insisting on the unreasonable once more knowing all this.

“Garnet. Let’s say that we open these tubes right now to save those kids and lose the data. What next?”

“.....”

“We’ll need some leverage to use in our favor if we want to get out of this alive after provoking the Ring.”

“Ma’am...”

Nanseul looked at Rikako as if he wanted to stop her, but she went on.

“Our boss would probably manage, no problem. He’s a Color and everything. But what about me and Nanseul? And the people at our Office? And you?”

She rebuked even harder, and then continued with a vague look on her face that didn’t appear to signal anger or sadness.

"I don't think I can handle spending the rest of my life being chased by the Ring. Are you prepared to bear that responsibility for us, Garnet?"

"....."

An agonizing silence fills the air. The most agonizing of all was my own behavior; all I could do was stare down at my feet, unable to stand my ground against Rikako's argument.

I thought I was ready to face this when I asked Mr. Vergilius for help over the payphone. I thought that even if saving Lapis was an arduous ordeal, I'd be able to do it with the help from the Office and from him.

But in the end, even that stereotypical feat of overcoming hardship was the preserve of those with power.

That's why Rikako and Nanseul have been planning ahead, looking far into the future—taking into account what kind of organization the Ring is, the ramifications of getting into conflict with this Syndicate, the losses it will cause, the gains they could reap if the operation is a success in spite of the risks, all of it.

Can I bear that responsibility? Of course I can't.

I can't even be sure of my own immediate future, so how would I do something farsighted planners aren't confident they can manage? There's just no way.

Even so...

“I... know all the kids lying in these tubes by name.”

But you two don’t.

You don’t know the soured sweetness of half-melted candy sticking to its wrapper, held inside a small, patient palm for hours and hours.

You don’t know the chilly breaths we had let out to make the fanciest drawings on frosted windows during a cold day with broken heaters.

Our inherent dearth gave richness to each moment of our lives.

So... we weren't related by blood, but we were family nonetheless.

“I... know all of them...”

I sank to my knees at the cruelty of having to weigh the lives of my dying siblings against profit and loss.

“Garnet...”

“But...”

How awful it was that I still couldn't reject it.

"You're right about everything... No, I'm actually not sure if you are. But it's just so upsetting that it sounds right, and I don't know what I can say to prove you wrong."

"I get how you feel. That wall of helplessness you've hit is another name for reality. So you need to accept it. We can't afford to live in fantasies."

Nanseul put it sedately, to which Rikako shrugged.

"It's a hurdle every Fixer has to go through to become the high-caliber workforce. Right, Nanseul? Hah, he used to be a big ditzy, too."

"I'm... used to it, now."

Nanseul said in agreement, though his smile left his face for a second.

Perhaps we all have a stage of pupation we must go through. Once we've hardened enough and fully prepared ourselves to leave the cocoon, only then will we begin our own flight.

In this metaphor, I'd only be a small larva just beginning to make my cocoon.

I hope the pain that will mold me into a butterfly is sensible.

“Alright, that’s enough of that. Time to get back to business. You cool, Garnet?”

Rikako saw me give a weak nod, then turned to Nanseul.

“Hey Nanseul, why don’t we make better use of the lab space now that there’s no one here to interrupt us. We’re gonna have to hurry, though.”

“Sure thing, ma’am.”

Nanseul replied casually. He then entered the control room to work with the panels.

“...I can save them—Rikako and Nanseul are quick with their work. There will definitely be a chance once they’re finished with the Singularity.”

Muttering what could be taken as a resolution to myself or an excuse to my friends still trapped in the machines, I headed for the entrance. I wanted to be ready to fend off intruders in case any appeared.

However, I heard the clacking of shoes coming from a completely unexpected direction. Someone was walking into this place from inside the control room.

It was the person with multiple rings... the auctioneer Mr. Vergilius and I saw.



“...What’s a Maestro doing here?!”

I heard Rikako’s confused exclamation. All of us probably shared the same feeling.

“Has it been a diversion after all? Sneaking into the lab while your allies joined the auction...”

Jumsoon was calm in spite of the incapacitated Ring members and researchers collapsed on the floor around her. There was not a shred of unease from the way she skimmed over the outfits Rikako and Nanseul were wearing and nodded as if she admired the craft.

"Hmm, it seems it's not just the children you're trying to extract... Aah, was I really, truly deceived by Sir Vergilius? Maybe I should've paid heed to the caution."

"...Don't come a step closer. I know you're head over heels for this tech. One flick and I could destroy every bit of data you've gathered, got it?"

Rikako warned, holding a lever. Jumsoon gave a vacant look at Rikako with a mysterious expression. And she raised the corners of her mouth very slowly.

"It was not my intention to eavesdrop upon you, but... You seemed to be rather fond of realities."

"What?"

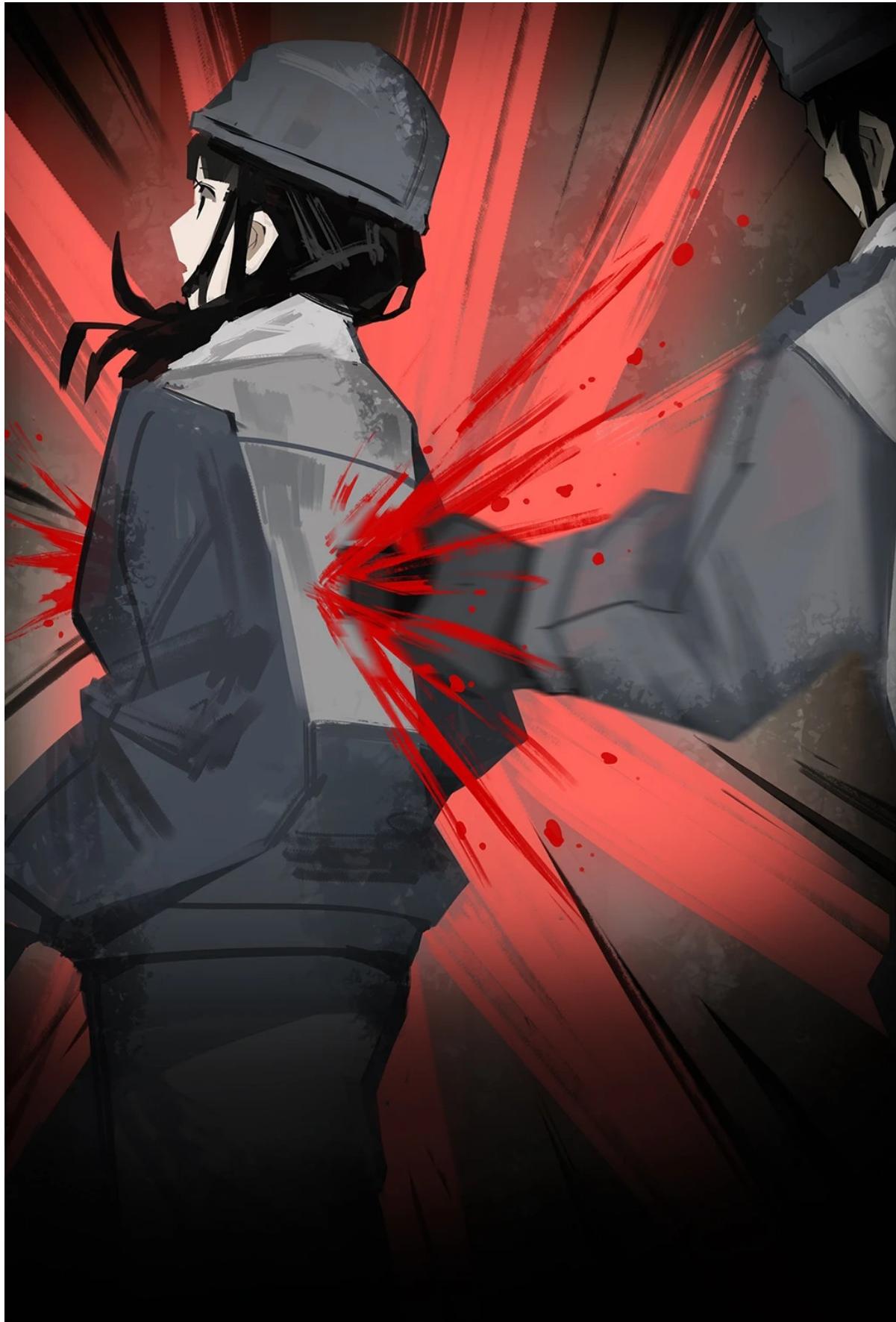
Rikako returned. She seemed to be taken aback by that arbitrary remark.

"Reality... Haah. People and their obsession with it. Personally, I'm averse to that word."

Her wandering eyes suddenly fixed their gaze on Rikako.

And then.

“Gahk...!”



Rikako frowns in pain and staggers. On the other hand, Nanseul maintained his usual calm expression. Only, he wasn't offering a hand to help Rikako stand.

It didn't take long to grasp what had just taken place before my eyes. Comprehending it, on the other hand, needed more time. The blade Nanseul was holding had impaled Rikako's abdomen.

“.....”

Rikako seems to have realized the same thing. Looking down at the blade poking through her stomach, she then turned to Nanseul who was standing at her back.

“Sim Nanseul...!”

“Like you said, ma'am... I figured we were on our own to make ourselves a way to live.”

“You damn little... When—when did you join hands... with them?”

“When we were setting up the operation. I knew a Grade 3 Fixer like me stood no real chance.”

“You gotta... show some love... for your Officemates at least... You’ve—sunk... low...”

“You had just said it yourself, too: You don’t put others in your priorities when you can’t take responsibility for their survival.”

“.....”

“Truth is, I considered bringing you round, but I decided not to. You’re not the type to mingle with others easily, after all.”

“Is that... what you meant by...?”

“Well... This was reality for me. Nothing’s too low for reality, is it?”

Rikako opened her mouth as if to say something, but soon closed it back. Maybe she had run out of strength, or couldn’t find anything left to say.

It took hearing Rikako collapse on the floor for me to finally speak up.

“Why... Why would you...”

In response, Nanseul shrugged with a quiet cackle. It was as though he were telling me that the answer was stated multiple times already. In some ways, his gesture resembled what Rikako did a bit ago, and that's when something finally dawned on me.

If this was the reality, perhaps the pupa shouldn't have left the cocoon in the first place. There was no such thing as sensible pain.

“Ahh... Thank you for coming all the way here, my precious gem.”

Jumsoon spoke to me. In an elegant voice, smooth as a marble.

“To tell you the truth, I had given up on the gem that is you, Garnet. The Red Gaze was a massive thorn standing in the way... And you'd even become a Fixer, what a hassle this became.”

“...Me?”

“I aim to create uncompromising perfection, but because of your little deviation, I almost had to compromise with reality and undermine the integrity of my art. I've been feeling rather unhappy because of that... I really owe you my thanks.”

She even bowed her head like she sincerely wanted to show her gratitude.

Realizing that all my friends, including myself, were treated like nothing more than materials for a twisted work of art had set my heart ablaze with anger.

“Why... Why did it have to be my friends? What kind of grudge did you have against Mister—I mean, the Red Gaze?”

I vented my unbridled anger at the Maestro. Why did it have to be the orphanage? What they needed was an ounce of happiness, not more tragedy. We were destitute children who were trying to find crumbs of joy in the smallest things. I can’t imagine a reason to go to the lengths of inflicting misfortune on people like us.

“Grudge?”

Yet, Jumsoon tilted her head as though she heard an unfamiliar word.

“I bear no ill feelings like that. Don’t you know what I mean, Garnet? That orphanage was chosen.”

“Chosen?”

That was not a word I was familiar with.

"It's where the first miracle occurred. Right there, right then, where you were."

Miracle? We never saw any miracles.

We were busy savoring little bits of happiness that weren't anything more than regular occurrences to others, we've never—

"Ah."

Then it hit me.

One thing flashed across my mind.

It was a catastrophe, not at all reminiscent of a miracle; it was the exact opposite of one.

The incident where a terrible mass of flesh appeared at the orphanage and took so many lives.

Chaos that Lapis and I could barely survive.

An event that caused Mr. Vergilius... the Red Gaze, to stop visiting the orphanage.

Is that what she's calling a miracle?

"Wait... You aren't talking about the incident on Christmas Eve, are you...?"

"What else could it be? It couldn't have happened on a more fitting day, truly befitting the holy eve commemorating birth... It was a miraculous day of uncut gems beginning to shine."

I wanted to believe I heard wrong.

But it was simply out of the question.

"That... was no miracle."

My body is shaking. I was overwhelmed with fury upon listening to her disregard for everything I cared for. My head was broiling with rage, I couldn't even form my words properly.

"No, no. It will mark the beginning of everything. The starting point of innumerable worlds that we will unravel from now on."

While I stay silent, Jumsoon keeps running her mouth.

"You may not have known this, Garnet, but our gallery had been planning to make something fascinating for a good while. For that to happen, we must dedicate utmost care to every step of it. We can't settle for anything less than what is chosen by the world, Garnet. You heard its cry, didn't you? The first of the resurrected to return from the scattered Light?"

Her voice raised higher and higher as she went on. An ecstatic flush suffused her face, and her eyes grew thin as if she were observing something captivating.

And in a moment, she made an order.

"Mister... Nanseul, was it? Could you pull the yellow lever next to you all the way up, if you please?"

"This lever..."

Nanseul hesitates for a moment.

And I look into his reluctant eyes.

No, please say that's not it.

Please don't accept that as part of your reality.

I stared at him with pleading eyes.

“...Is what you think it is.”

Even though I didn’t know the lever’s exact function, one thing was clear to me.

That everything I did to save my friends will be for naught.

That everything will start falling apart right before my eyes.

That this downfall will be caused by someone who I thought was family.

That I will no longer be able to save Lapis.

“...Understood.”

“Nanseul!!!”

A shout akin to a scream escaped my throat. My legs which were frozen stiff until a second ago began sprinting towards Nanseul.

But, I was wrong to the end.

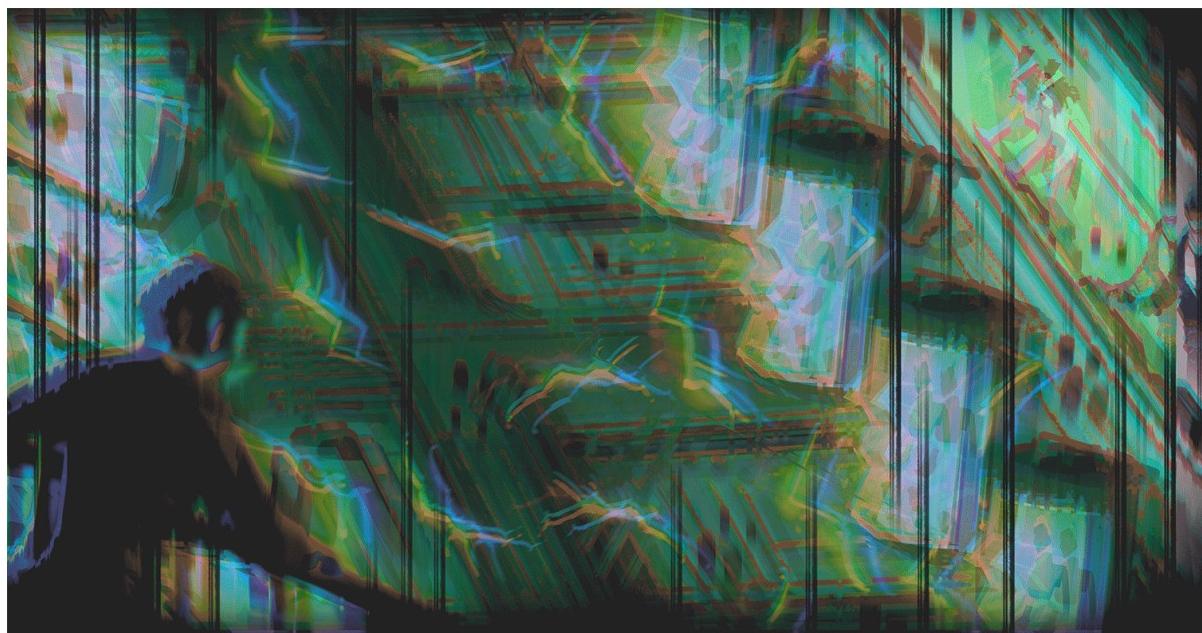
It was me who wasn’t in his right mind. Rikako gave me harsh but truthful words, and yet I could never open my eyes. This is reality, Garnet. It’s time to wake up.

[Disjoined worlds identity-superposition device, activated. Initiating refraction rate intensification sequence. Target: Maximum Refraction.]

Following the announcement of a dry mechanical voice, a chorus of distressing hums filled the laboratory.

It was the sound of rifts opening...

And the sound of something shattering within me, impaled by the stake that is reality.



- Translation Notes:

Jumsoon is male (남성), but is referred to with female pronouns in this chapter of Leviathan, specifically the word «그녀». This is for two reasons:

- 1.) Jumsoon's name «점순이» is traditionally feminine in its formation, -순이 being a suffix typically reserved for females. Jumsoon has a feminine appearance to Garnet's eyes, and he hasn't explicitly learned yet that Jumsoon is a man.
- 2.) Maestros are always referred to with "He" as a form of respect to the title. Think of it as army privates referring to a female sergeant as "Sir". This is why Garnet maintains his incorrect assumption.